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AUTHOR Kollen, Patsy Phillips
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ABSTRACT

How to deal with the absence of creativity and critical thinking in the educational setting is discussed. All efforts to improve education will be futile if we don't take into account the absence of relationship among the participants and between the participants and the content of education. Relationship--i.e., connecting with others and with knowledge and ideas in a way that provides support for excellence--is essential for enthusiasm, the emotional ingredient necessary for creativity and critical thinking. Egocentered thinking and feeling foster psychological barriers that corrupt relationship. Passion and silent watching free the mind of the psychological barriers that corrupt relationship. Creativity and critical thinking are inherent when human beings are doing and being together in fun, learning, and discovery. If we have been unable to connect in this way, it is because our egocentered thoughts and feelings have fostered fear, imitation, boredom, measurement, competition, evaluation, and judgment. There is no need to foster something that is inherent; the need is to see what prevents the expression of creativity and critical thinking. (RM)

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CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

by

Patsy Phillips Kollen
New Buffalo, Michigan

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Running Head: Creativity

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CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

BY

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Précis

We are concerned about the absence of creativity and critical thinking in our educational settings. This implies, also, that we are concerned about this absence in our lives as human beings. This presentation will enlarge on the following:

1. Relationship is essential for enthusiasm, the emotional ingredient necessary for creativity and critical thinking.
2. Egocentered thinking and feeling foster psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.
3. Passion and silent watching free the mind of the psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.

CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

We are concerned about the absence of creativity and critical thinking in our educational settings. This implies, also, that we are concerned about this absence in our lives as human beings. This paper will enlarge on the following:

1. Relationship is essential for enthusiasm, the emotional ingredient necessary for creativity and critical thinking.

2. Egocentered thinking and feeling foster psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.

3. Passion and silent watching free the mind of the psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.

In the current debate on educational excellence, the prevailing comment is that mediocrity is the overriding fact. What is missing in the debate is seeing mediocrity first and foremost as a human problem. Suggested solutions include more time and money, smaller classes, better teacher preparation, and merit pay. At the same time, others are saying that we know from past experience that none of these solutions has ensured excellence, creativity, or critical thinking. For example, we <u>know</u> that classes of four children are just as apt to be mediocre as those with thirty.

Some of the debate points to the consequences of ignoring the human aspects of this problem: alcohol and drug abuse, physical and mental abuse, teenage pregnancy, student dropout, teacher burnout, violence, suicides of school-age children.

Beyond these, a case can be made that the majority of students and teachers not effected by these consequences do, nevertheless, lack enthusiasm for the educational endeavor. This lack of enthusiasm is a very subtle, but dangerous, consequence of mediocrity.

Many of the reports say that schooling as it currently operates makes creative, independent thinking practically impossible. Conformity is all that is possible, with its resulting mediocrity. The majority of students and teachers do what is supposed to be done to get by, to get the payoffs wanted or needed, to get a share of the pats on the back passed out by others. A better prescription for mediocrity is difficult to imagine.

All of our efforts will be futile if we don't take into account the absence of relationship between the participants and between the participants and the content of education. Education is first of all a human endeavor and educational problems are first of all, and most importantly, problems between human beings: problems of relationship.

The absence of relationship is an absence of connection between the participants and between the participants and the subject matter. Relationship can be defined as connecting with others and with knowledge and ideas in a way that provides support for excellence, whether demonstrated in creativity, critical thinking, or learning.

Excellence in creativity, critical thinking, and learning may be natural inclinations of human beings who are free of the psychological barriers of fear, compliance, boredom, control, imitation, comparison, and measurement. Very young children seem to demonstrate these traits in abundance. And, as adults recalling our moments of creativity or learning, we remember them as free and easy, natural, certainly not problematic.

Let us explore these issues in a concrete way beginning with ourselves, here and now. Let us set aside for the moment abstract and speculative concerns about fostering creativity and critical thinking.

This time we have together can be used as an experiment, a litmus test of our ability to be creative persons and critical thinkers here and now. How are we <u>now</u> as human beings? Are we secondhand human beings, or, are we creative?

If my major contribution is to share my thoughts and feelings with you, and, if your major contribution is to hear me, can we do it in such a way that we touch each other and are connected in this endeavor? If we can't be creative here and now, it seems a bit hypocritical to be talking about helping others be creative. Can we communicate from our hearts and minds without psychological barriers creeping in which make us mediocre, secondhand participants ?

Perhaps if we are able to be here together, opening our hearts and minds to each other, we would be sharing in a state

of creativity. By and large, and for the most part, we are mediocre and secondhand human beings. We are too seldom creative and are too seldom engaged in critical thinking about our day to day living. Can we be creative human beings during this time together? If not, can we utilize critical thinking to see that we are secondhand human beings, superficially communicating and passing judgments on each other which interfere with what we say we want for ourselves and others?

What do we mean by creativity and critical thinking? The following definitions of "create" are given in The American Heritage Dictionary: to cause to exist; bring into being; give rise to; originate; bring about; produce; to be first to portray or give character to. The dictionary also refers the reader to the appendix to further explore the Indo-European root of the word. Two little words are given: to grow. It is interesting that our current definitions of "create" seem to have lost something of importance from the root meaning. Grow has a connotation different from produce. We can produce all those things we normally refer to as creative without growth being an essential part of those endeavors.

Take, for example, this paper. It <u>is</u> a unique and one-of-a-kind product; but, that need not mean that it is creative. It could merely be an experience of self-interest to enhance or build a reputation, to impress, to add to a vita. Beyond a state of producing, creativity must also imply openness, growing.

Assuming we all have some sort of shared and acceptable definition of thinking, the other term to explore is "critical." The following definitions are given in the same dictionary: inclined to judge severely; given to censuring; characterized by exact and careful evaluation and judgment. Under the synonyms, there is additional information which puts a different light on this word. Here it says that "critical" implies arriving at a turning point and the imminence of decisive change, usually attended by considerable risk, peril, or suspense.

We find the same difficulty here as we discovered with "create": creating things without growth is merely a therapy or a pastime. Here, judging, censuring, and evaluating without the attendant risk, peril, or suspense is merely closing the door on inquiry.

Critical thinking, then, can be thought of as putting at risk our preconceptions by careful evaluation which may result in judging them false in certain ways, and censuring them as inappropriate for the question at hand. Embedded in this view of critical thinking is the real possibility of coincidental change in our preconceptions, a turning point in how we view the question at hand.

Generally, we impute negative connotations to risk, peril, and suspense. The suspense of not knowing how we might unfold is generally considered a rather frightening state of affairs. Therefore, we tend to play it safe as human beings and exist

with our mediocrity, our uncreativeness, and our inability to think critically in terms of our day to day living.

If both creativity and critical thinking are possible only when we are risk-takers open to peril and suspense, then we need to examine our high security needs. Our brains do need security and we do need to live healthy, ordered, and harmonious lives. But if health, order, and harmony also imply creativity and critical thinking which are attended by risk, peril, and suspense of which we are afraid, where are we? Perhaps where we look for security is the problem.

If the only security is in understanding that all of our attempts to get security kill the very things most essential to living life fully and creatively, then perhaps we can begin to see the many ways in which we deceive ourselves about our security needs. We've been conditioned to feel that our security rests in having a strong sense of self. Let us risk questioning whether or not that sense of self actually provides security.

Perhaps we've bought into a gigantic hoax or illusion as many of our old illusions and myths have dropped away. The hoax is that we think we can find security in a strong sense of self, knowing who we are. It seems we fall into two categories here. Either we are arrogant in thinking of ourselves as confident and knowing what we believe and want; or, we are paralyzed because we are lacking in this sort of self-esteem. Either of these self-images are dangerous barriers to

creativity and critical thinking. If we have self-confidence, we will be concerned with protecting it; and, if we have none, we will be desperately trying to get it. Are there then enough energies left for growing healthfully, creatively, dynamically? So caught up in our "selves" will we be capable of critical thinking?

Intellectually, we know that living is attended by risk, peril, and suspense. We don't know when or how we are going to die, how long our relationships or jobs will last. In spite of this intellectual understanding, however, it seems we expend an enormous amount of energy in buttressing our "selves" up so that we have this sense of security and permanence. Looking closely at ourselves and the uncreative nature of our lives, shouldn't we begin to question the ways in which we are attempting to find security? It doesn't seem to be working well for us anyway, so why not question it?

Let's ask ourselves a few questions about here and now. While reading this paper, have you been a mediocre or a creative human being? Have you been bored? Have you caught yourself looking at your watch? Have you been distracted? Instead of attending, have you found yourself criticizing my approach or thinking about what neat things you could be doing instead? Have you noticed thoughts popping into your head: "God, she must be one of those touchy-feely types" or "Just wait a minute here, you don't seem to be taking such and such into account."

What about me? What do I do with the thoughts and images that creep in as I try to communicate with you? Images of you yawning, bored, glassy eyed; or, supportive, as I see you nodding your head affirmatively. What do I do with all that? Am I wondering what you think about me? Am I sidetracked by such thoughts so I am blocked from communicating with you from my heart and mind?

Do I interpret every imagined yawn as a sign of boredom and get lost in my imaginings? Do I begin to think, "I'm doing a bad job." Do I begin to judge myself, or, do I begin to judge you, thinking, "What a waste, trying to communicate with educators." Or do I imagine some of you as supportive and decide to at least try to communicate with you?

What do we do with all these interferences? And, can we do nothing about them? Can we just watch them and let them be? Can our minds see how such interferences are inhibiting our exploring and understanding creativity and critical thinking? It doesn't matter if my imaginings are positive or negative from the point of view of my ego. Either way, such imaginings are dangerous to my being here creatively and dangerous to my ability to think critically about the issues we are exploring. If my mind can't let go of those things, I can't be sharing from my heart and mind. I can't be attentive. I can't be growing, giving, unfolding, and connecting with you.

The same for you. If your main function is to fully attend to me, to take everything in but you find yourself judging or praising me, do you see how inattentive you are as a reader?

If our endeavor is to explore creativity and critical thinking, then having open hearts and minds and risking our beliefs and conclusions are crucial. If we see we can't do it, then we realize our status as mediocre human beings. Critical thinking can help us in turning from mediocrity and changing to creativity. But for this to happen, we must risk all that we think we know. Perhaps what has to be at peril is the sense of self discussed earlier. As I watch myself as a writer, I can see the thoughts and feelings that interfere with my being creatively present. I can also see these thoughts and feelings are necessary to a strong and secure sense of self.

And, as I watch myself further as a writer, or remember myself as a reader, I can't think of anything except my own thought process that keeps me clinging to this illusory sense of self. I can't think of anything except my own wasted energies expended in those kinds of thoughts and feelings that prevent me from being creatively present. It is in this sense that I like to explore the statement, "Egocentered thinking and feeling foster psychological barriers which corrupt relationship. Can we treat this statement as an open question, one to explore, rather than attack or defend?

If our thoughts, in effect, keep us living in our memories or in our imaginations, in the past or in the future, then they must corrupt relationship, which in turn interferes with creativity and critical thinking. These must be here, now, or not at all. Let's say that during a conference presentation of this paper the public address system suddenly quits working. A corrupt or mediocre response on my part would be to throw up my hands in disgust and to decry the conference management. A creative response would be for me to be so attentive to the necessity of your hearing me that I might automatically walk to the center of the room and continue talking as though nothing had happened. Again, the only thing preventing the second, and appropriate response, is my getting sidetracked from the primary endeavor, delivering my talk in a passionate manner. And the only way to get sidetracked is the shift of my attention from the matter at hand to follow such stupid thoughts as those mentioned.

Perhaps creativity and critical thinking are mutually exclusive. If we are being and sharing and growing together creatively, if I'm writing and you are reading out of full attention, then perhaps there is no thinking at that time, critical or otherwise. But, if we are not able to be, and do, and share, and grow together, then critical thinking can help us to a clearer sense of the problem. If I can't share with you in written communication from my heart and mind, and, if I get sidetracked by imagining all sorts of positive or negative

reactions, then perhaps I need to step back and say, "OK, I'm not a creative human being." Beginning with the actual, I may begin to understand the problem.

If we catch ourselves doing any of these things, then surely we have to say we're not being very creative. Creativity embraces openness, experiences things with a newness and freshness. Even if what I'm writing is touchy-feely, foolish, misguided, or stupid, I'm still a human being sharing my concerns and my care about these things with you. A creative human being would attend to me, would be open to hear between the lines of what I'm writing, or underneath, or beyond the poorly chosen words. And, if by chance, what I'm saying isn't stupid, or foolish, has some merit, something worth exploring, understanding, then your thoughts, your clock watching, your criticizing or praising, prevents reading with full attention that would enable you to be creatively present.

This silent watching and critical thinking can pave the way for relationship and creativity. If we attend to the distractions and allow them to pull us out of our creative presence, the degree to which that happens is the degree to which we lose energy and passion that are essential to our connecting enthusiastically.

By silent watching, we learn that we do certain things because we're worried about whether or not we're impressing, or worried about whether our self-esteem will go up or down.

By thinking critically, we learn that these interferences are barriers to communication, to relationship, to creativity. Through this silent watching and critical thinking, we realize that egocenteredness is absolutely dangerous to a passionate concern for creativity.

We don't have to worry about the question, "How can we become creative and critically thinking human beings?" Our first concern is to watch, silently; to discover in what ways we are not creative and not thinking critically. As we watch ourselves operate out of self-interest; and, as we begin to see, critically, the real dangers of this egocenteredness to creativity, these inhibiting factors drop away. This silent watching and critical thinking serve a very useful purpose, a house-cleaning function. As we see the things which make us secondhand human beings unfit for growing and creating; and, as we see growth and creativity as essential for living life fully; and, as we demand living life creatively, our life-defeating beliefs and illusions drop away.

Let's go back to this sense of self, this barrier to creativity, and look at it critically. Intellectually, at least, we can see that thinking of self as an encapsulated idea about who we are doesn't hold water. I can not separate myself from other people, other things. I can't think of even one idea that I can honestly say is my own original idea. So who is kidding whom? Even as a physical organism, I'm not

separate from the air, water, and ground that provide the necessities for my living. I can't really separate myself from people I've know, the books I've read, the training I've received.

We've deluded ourselves into thinking that we are isolated, encapsulated egos with personalities that are fairly set and rigid and all we need do is improve on our "selves." What is this self that we're trying to improve? Certainly there is a uniqueness to each of us, some wonderful flavor that's all our own. But wouldn't that flavor be more distinct and tasteful without this sense of self? Doesn't a sense of self contribute to conformity and imitation, rather than an expression of uniqueness?

It seems more appropriate and accurate to say that our sense of who we are is continually changing. This sense is a momentum in relationship with other people, things, books, ideas, science - whatever. In fact, who I am is a movement, a relationship. I'm not an enclosed entity. I'm part of a movement in relationship.

If, in fact, we are an unfolding momentum in relationship rather than a set personality which can only be tamed, shaped, improved, held in esteem or criticized, then such an illusion would be dangerous to creativity, to growing. If we are looking to an illusion for our security, then it's no wonder that we're always mediocre and in conflict with ourselves and with others. Conflict requires energy which could be used for creative growth.

If this is what is happening, no wonder we are secondhand human beings. We are seldom creative, open to newness and mystery, listening and talking from our hearts and minds.

Being in a state of not knowing may be another important aspect when exploring creativity. This could be a state of not knowing who I am or who you are. It could also be a state of not knowing what is the truth. Such a state would seem to be a living with that risk, peril, and suspense discussed earlier. If everything remains open, two things might follow: humility and compassion. If we really don't know, it seems we might be much more eager to explore together.

For example, leaving statements we make in our exploration of creativity and critical thinking as open statements, neither defended nor attacked, would encourage exploration and investigation. We would want to put our heads together and find out the truth or falseness of our statements. Open questions might leave us humble, probably a necessary ingredient for creativity.

If we are continually questioning, and if we really don't know for sure, then our approaches would come out of a risky, perilous, suspenseful state of being. We wouldn't jump to conclusions that become blinders preventing further exploration.

A state of not knowing might also open the door on compassion. If I don't know where I am or who I am, why should I be judgmental of where you are, or who you are? If I really

don't know if I'm here today as a creative human being openly sharing with you or if I'm here to impress you for self-serving reasons, then it seems like I would give you the same benefit of the doubt. I really don't know if your response to me is out of compassion or out of self-interest. But by leaving it an open question, we might be embracing the risk, peril, and suspense necessary for creativity. Compassion and cooperation may prevail instead of judgment and argument. As compassion and humility may be requisites for connecting with each other, we may find ourselves at the turning point for creativity and critical thinking.

In closing, I'd like to return to the three points made at the beginning of this paper.

Relationship is essential for enthusiasm, the emotional ingredient necessary for creativity and critical thinking.

Egocentered thinking and feeling foster psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.

Creativity and critical thinking are inherent when human beings are doing and being together in fun, learning, and discovery. If we have been unable to connect in this way, it is because our egocentered thoughts and feelings have fostered fear, imitation, boredom, measurement, competition, evaluation, and judgment. There is no need to foster something that is inherent; the need is to see what prevents the expression of creativity and critical thinking.

Passion and silent watching free the mind of the psychological barriers which corrupt relationship.

Passion and silent watching are not alien traits to us. Passion is that same burning we refer to as, "Wanting something so bad you can taste it." It is the passion before which all other things surrender, including egocenteredness and desire for creativity.

Silent watching is to watch what we do, say, feel, and think in the same way we might watch an un-named caterpillar turn into an un-named butterfly; without opinion or judgment, quietly observing and learning.

This process is a very simple one made difficult only because our minds do not see the danger posed by egocentered thinking and feeling to creativity and critical thinking.